

# Notes on the economy in the rural non-capitalist societies: the contribution of A.V. Čajanov to the historical studies and the current political debate

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## Introduction: a new agrarian question

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For those who deal with the history of pre-industrial societies, particularly medieval Western and Mediterranean societies and used to working with the concepts of 'crisis' and 'transition', the complex problems associated with the current global penetration of capitalist ratio in rural systems of production, demography, ecology, national and international social relations between classes, constitute a fruitful possibility of analysis, theory and comparison (RÖSENER 2008; VANHAUTE 2011).

Out of the interpretative category of "the end of peasantry", applied in late sixties and early seventies for industrial societies and a decade later for the Third World (HAUBERT 1991), since the nineties of the twentieth century a revival of questions about perspectives of national and supra-national agricultural policies and, more generally, the social role of the peasantry led to the establishment of important political movements, with a strong identity matrix provided by the rural labour are opposed to the process of capitalist globalization in the production and distribution of resources, particularly in Central and South America (TOURAINÉ 1988). These movements such as *Via Campesina*, or the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil, which in their theoretical elaborations formulate a "new agrarian question", referring to the classic question that had committed the reflection Marx (1964) and Marxist (e.g. KAUTSKY 1959; critical review, in relation to the issues in the current debate, in BROOKFIELD 2008; REDIN, CARDOSO DA SILVEIRA 2011), saw in the rural social forces involved in the fight against global capitalism a new political and ethical subject able to transcend the relationship between capital and labour and to put in the public debate the renewed value of peasant culture as a common good (e.g. McMICHAEL 2006a; 2006b; 2009; PLOEG 2009). In this perspective, the social element of resistance to both the land grabbing by states and trans-national corporations and the new enclosures consequent to it, and the financialization of international agricultural politics, which is, in the interpretation of Raj Patel (2013), the second and current phase of the "Long Green Revolution", lies in the structure of the peasant family and smallholding, which operates according to a different logic than that of capitalism.

## 1. Čajanov and the peasant mode of production

Economists, anthropologists and historians have a common framework based on this socio-anthropological and historical structure, and this framework emerged in

the early twentieth century in the rural Tsarist Russia, but only since the sixties have become popular in the West, deeply affecting historical studies. In 1964 a short and dense article by Daniel Thorner appeared in the *Annales*, that, when renewing the terminology of the Marxist school, sought to interpret contemporary societies - the pre-revolutionary Russia, Indonesia, India, Japan, until the First World War, Mexico, to the period between the two World Wars, China - with the interpretive category of "peasant economy" (THORNER 1964; cf. VILAR 1998 and also, for the contemporary rural China, BENJAMIN, BRANDT 2002) more effective than others, ingrained, such as those of the "Asiatic mode of production" (SOFRI 1973), "semi-feudal structures", "subsistence economy", "Oriental society". The theoretical horizon of this proposal was identified in the work of a Russian agricultural economist, Aleksandr Čajanov, little-known in the West (DIETZE 1934; GERSCHENKRON 1943; JASNY 1949, GEORGESCU-ROEGEN 1960), charged in 1930 to be chief, with another great economist, Kondratieff (SHANIN 2009; for the Kondratieff work cf. BARNETT 1995), of a populist party and killed in 1939 (it was only rehabilitated in 1987), of which Thorner quoted one work about the system of peasant farming, written in German in 1923 (ČAJANOV 1923) and announcing the English translation in 1965. In the same year, in *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, was published a remarkable study of Basile Kerblay on the life and work of the economist (KERBLAY 1964), which prepares Western scholars to a subsequent article by Thorner (1966) and in the end for the publication in English of two works by Čajanov, *On the Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems* (original in German, 1924) and *Peasant Farm Organization* (original in Russian, 1925) (ČAJANOV 1966; 1986; KERBLAY 1996), which in 1976 and 1991 would be added *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia* (ČAJANOV 1976, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1920), *The Theory of Peasant Co-operatives* (ČAJANOV 1991, orig. in Russian 1927).

The work of Čajanov arises in a context of renewal of Russians agronomic studies which, in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery (1861) and the establishment of a new institutional articulation (*zemstvo*) at a provincial and a district level, since 1880s, focus their attention on the peasant smallholding. Numerous statistics about peasant condition, in the construction of which it is already worth some analytical aspects (DARROW 2001), provide the intense conflict of interpretation which, despite some similarities, opposes a technician like Čajanov, who also operates in the fruitful scientific context of the so-called "Organization and Production School" (THORNER 1966, p. 1241; BELYKH 1989) and in contact with similar international experiences (BOURGHOLTZER 1999) to a theorist and revolutionary as Lenin; a 'debate' which is the interpretative framework of reference in the historiographical literature dedicated to the pre-industrial societies of Western countries. The way Lenin interprets peasant society, as he underlines in his *Development of Capitalism in Russia* in 1899, is by means of tripartite division of the peasant classes - rich, middle and poor peasants. In this tripartite scheme the social dynamics induced by capitalism in the countryside push toward polarization around the extreme classes, while the middle class tends to stand with proletariat rather than join up with the richer farmers (LENIN 1956). This peasant middle class is, incidentally, the biggest beneficiary of the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the Twenties, after the 'war communism' of 1918-21, and the target of the tragic Stalinist collectivization in 1929, justified by the fear of an increase in the *kulaks'* power that would undermine the outcome of the Revolution and instead was rooted in conflicts within the Bolshevik Party and some difficulties in rural policies between 1926 and 1928, which in theory is due neither Marxism nor Lenin (SHANIN 1986, 11).

Unlike Lenin, Čajanov affirms how hardly effective is trying to understand the peasants' household through the theoretical concepts and methods developed by classical and neoclassical economics, in which wages, income, profits and interest are factors necessarily present, being closely interdependent. Since the peasant family doesn't hire wage-earners, one of the cornerstone of classical economic interpretation falls, making it impossible even a calculation of profits, annuities and interest on the capital invested, nor would it be possible to calculate an economic value to the unpaid work within the family. The logic underlying the apparent inequality among Russian peasants with reference to the size of land farmed and the ownership of the means of production rather depends on demographic factors, summarized in the čajanovian concept of 'labour-consumer balance' or, otherwise said, the relationship between producers (working adults) and consumers (working adults, children and the old) in the different stages of the demographic cycle. While in fact the capitalist enterprise is able to calculate objectively the net profit of the business, after the deduction of the spending on salaries and equipment from the gross profit, and on this basis, it works for the maximization of the profit, the family firm is obliged to decide subjectively the amount of the net profit, obtained by subtracting from the gross profit the expenditure allowing a new crop year, to destine for consumption, to invest or use for provisions. Every household, therefore, tries to get a product tailored to its essential needs, striving to ensure that any increase in yield does not lead to additional business efforts beyond certain limits. In other words, it seeks a balance between needs satisfaction and effort. This balance is also related to demographic factors, family size and the proportion between producers and consumers. On this key concept Čajanov argues, also studying a number of factors that weigh on this equilibrium: quantity and quality of land available to the peasant household for example, the market prices and the price of the land itself, the interest rates on the capital, accessibility to the jobs outside the country, the population density of the district in which the family insists. Economic behaviour that follows is irreducible to capitalist logic: if it is necessary for the basic needs of the family, the peasant household can afford longer working hours, or to sell products at lower prices, and continue, of course, to survive, demonstrating a competitive force compared to capitalist firms, much stronger than the classical economics was willing to recognize (HARRISON 1977). Furthermore, the family organization of the rural economy reaches a technical superiority over any other form of organization if it acts in a cooperative system, in which the state intervenes to regulate the dynamics of the market (THORNER 1966; BERNSTEIN 2009).

## 2. Čajanov in medieval and modern studies

It is an extremely dense theoretical framework, reinforced by trustworthy statistics and a pragmatic work in the field of the same Čajanov and his collaborators. Only mention it, since it is not my field of study, the diffusion of the čajanovian model in demographic and anthropological studies (from SAHLINS 1980; see, e.g., TANNENBAUM 1984; GASTELLU 1985, BENNETT 1991), and a few words about the agrarian historiography (which also has a lot to do with demography and anthropology), to justify my paper. Within classical and archaeological studies, and then medieval studies, in fact, the problem of the transition between ancient and medieval world as summarized in the 'immortal' "Pirenne question" (from last PETRALIA 1995), was renewed in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century thanks to

the work of Karl Polanyi (1978; 2000) and its economic anthropology (for medieval studies see, pioneering, GRIERSON 1959; DUBY 1973): the contemporary economic laws and the economic theory related to it, those for which the demand and supply are compared by means of money, in an abstract market, do not apply to pre-modern societies, in which the mechanisms of production and exchange are functional to social integration and the institutions. For medieval and modern studies, the work that perhaps more than any other includes the Čajanov's thesis is *An Economic theory of the feudal system* by Witold Kula (1970, and also, even more explicitly, 1972). Not only in the description of the pre-capitalist peasant farm, but also in the illustration of the features of feudal lords' farm that, minimizing costs, tries to maximize the purchase of imported goods and lands, Kula develops the theories of the Russian economist, also verifying, according to the model, a greater efficiency in terms of productivity in small and medium farms than in large manor estates. The issues raised in the book are from then on, although with a different periodization in European historiography dealing with the transition 'from feudalism to capitalism', a point of reference even when the Polish model of feudalism is critically discussed and rejected for others geographical contexts. Where market structures early assert its primacy in trading system, e.g. in Normandy and in the territories between the Loire and the Rhine (LABROUSSE 1933; ABEL 1976; BOIS 1976), or where, in Sicily, Apulia, southern Andalusia, there are particular regimes of large land property, patterns of settlement and massive use of hired labour (AYMARD 1978; 1981; 1983; LEPRE 1973; MASSAFRA 1989), the Čajanovian analysis is difficult to apply, even though, from time to time, it will rescue some concepts, such as peasant "self-exploitation".

The cornerstones of Čajanov's thesis are substantially present in the most important research on the relationship between rural economy and institutions of the Eastern Roman Empire, in the same period in which it appears in the discussion of western agrarian history (PATLAGEAN 1975; LAIOU-THOMADAKIS 1977), and constitute a fruitful reference in particular in the English historiography, albeit in different ways, for scholars such as Yevgeny Kosminsky, Michael Postan and Rodney Hilton (bibliography and critical reviews in GATRELL 1982; ASHTON, PHILPIN 1989; HATCHER, BAILEY 2001; CAMPBELL 2005). Recently, it is explicitly cited in an important article by Domenico Vera on the features of the Sicilian peasant society in the sixth century, read through the documentation that came from the letters of Gregory the Great (VERA 2006), and indirectly, quoting Sahlins, Boserup (1965) and Meillassoux (1981), in the great Marxist reconstruction of early medieval Mediterranean and European economic structures provided by Chris Wickham, in which the "peasant mode of production", based on the individual family and the mutual support between families, is an effective interpretative framework even in the case of lack of written sources (WICKHAM 2009, 569-581).

### 3. Problems and perspectives for the current debate

Beyond some aspects more properly related to economic studies, such as the use of marginal analysis or the presence or absence of macroeconomic theory in the so-called "neopopulist" school (SIVAKUMAR 2001; COLEMAN, TAITSLIN 2008; BERNSTEIN 2009, 69f.), and without speaking about the most consistent 'Leninist' critiques (e.g. PATNAIK 1979), the Čajanovian analysis raises a number of significant problems also for its use in the current political debate.

First of all, since the focus is the peasant household, the theory lacks a theoretical framework for the relationship between family and markets, subject to which also Čajanov devotes a very rich empirical analysis, or does not contribute adequately either to the interpretation of phenomena of current capitalization of the peasant family (LEHMANN 1986) or to the interpretation of the behaviour of medieval and modern societies, which appear actively involved in trade and credit networks (BRITNELL 1993; KITSIKOPOULOS 2000; SCHOFIELD 2003; CAMPBELL 2005).

The consideration of the internal logic of the peasant household and its organization, which makes possible its adaptation to external conditions, shows the very family as something that, going constantly through all periods of history, dares to become a generic and a-historical concept (THORNER 1966, 22).

In the end, if in the Čajanov's model some members of the peasant family are involved in trade or craft, to ensure, in the family's economic strategy, the 'labour-consumer balance', to what extent they remain in the proper sense of the word, 'peasants'? Otherwise, the presence of outdoor or marginal activities to the rural work is an example of the various strategies the peasant family has available, remaining, however, its unity and identity, or it reveals, within the peasant family, the dynamic of the development of capitalist commodity relations? (BERNSTEIN 2009, 65f.)

Political theory, history, anthropology, social struggles: the contribution of Čajanov in each of these fields is sensitive and increasingly recognized. The wealth of studies on the peasant condition shows how useful is an interdisciplinary approach to problems, like all scientific and historiographical problems, that speak about and to the contemporary world. The aim of this paper was to be an invitation to collect the inheritance of complex theoretical concepts such as Čajanov thesis, recovering the most dynamic and pragmatic aspects of the interpretative framework, the validity of which is demonstrated by studies about pre-industrial societies, avoiding however oversimplification and anachronistic and static views, unnecessary to the contemporary debate on the new agrarian question.

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## Abstract

This paper aims to recall the fundamental issues of the classic debate on the agrarian question, highlighting the contribution of Aleksandr Čajanov the definition of the peasant mode of production. The summary of the Russian economist's main theses and the bibliographic reconstruction of their fortune in the economic literature and historiography about pre-industrial societies provide the opportunity to draw an interdisciplinary path, useful to contemporary reflection on the new peasant condition.

## Keywords

Čajanov; Lenin; peasant mode of production; smallholding; agrarian question.

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